

nomination by a wide margin—by a wide margin, bipartisan support. Given Colonel Tien's past leadership experiences, I am hopeful that the Department will finally get the Senate-confirmed leader it needs and deserves in this critical post.

The American people are counting on seasoned leadership at the Department of Homeland Security after too many years of vacancies. I describe those vacancies as Swiss cheese, executive branch Swiss cheese, and that needs to end.

I applaud President Biden for nominating Colonel Tien. I encourage my colleagues to confirm him.

Let me say on a personal note to Colonel Tien and his wife Tracy—and they have a couple of daughters, Amanda and Rebecca—when you serve, as he did in the military for 24 years, rising to the rank of colonel, you don't just serve that as an individual. It is not just the officer or enlisted person who is serving. If they have a family—and we almost all do—the family serves as well. If they have a spouse, they have children, they serve as well. And we don't often acknowledge that, not often enough, at least.

I just want to take a moment to say to Colonel Tien's wife Tracy, to their daughters, Amanda and Rebecca, we are grateful for your service as well. And we are honored and privileged that you would share a good man in this new role for our country.

And to Colonel Tien, whose mother recently passed away, I understand, just a few months ago, from COVID-19, let me say that I know your mom must be looking down from on high today and feeling very proud of her son on this day and every day.

With that, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. WHITEHOUSE). The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

CENSORSHIP

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, at the end of May, Facebook announced that it would no longer censor claims that the coronavirus was man-made. The mainstream media, which had savaged the story during the previous administration, suddenly started backpedaling, and the Biden White House, which had reportedly canceled the previous administration's investigation into whether the novel coronavirus originated in a Wuhan lab, announced a 90-day inquiry into the virus's origins.

The occasion for all this backpedaling was apparently a report in the Wall Street Journal that three researchers who worked at Wuhan Institute of Virology "sought hospital care" in late 2019 for symptoms consistent with the coronavirus. In the wake of

that report, it became impossible for the President or the mainstream media or Facebook to deny what had always been a plausible theory: that the virus came from the virology lab in Wuhan.

Journalists moved to explain their previous rejection of this theory, and some of them openly admitted what had been obvious: that they rejected the theory not because of flaws in the theory itself but because of those who had advanced this hypothesis.

We don't know what these revived investigations will ultimately show, but the Wuhan reversal illustrates multiple issues. One, of course, is the need to remember that our social media experience is heavily curated. The posts and ads we see are selected for us by complex algorithms that analyze the data social media companies have collected on each of us and curate our experience accordingly.

On top of that, as the past year or two has illustrated, social media companies actively censor certain material, meaning that there are posts we will never see.

As chairman and now ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee's Communications and Tech Subcommittee, I have pushed for transparency requirements for social media companies, and I have introduced two bipartisan bills that would increase internet transparency while preserving the light-touch approach to regulation that has allowed the internet to flourish.

My Filter Bubble Transparency Act would allow social media users to opt out of the filter bubble—in other words, to opt out of the filtered experience tailored for them by opaque algorithms—and instead see an unfiltered social media feed or search results.

The Platform Accountability and Transparency Act, which I introduced with Senator SCHATZ, would increase transparency and accountability around content moderation. Sites would be required to provide an easily digestible disclosure of their content moderation practices for users, and, importantly, they would be required to explain their decisions to remove material to consumers.

Under the PACT Act, if a site chose to remove your post, it would have to tell you why it decided to remove your post. The PACT Act would also require sites to have an appeals process. So if Facebook, for example, removed one of your posts, it would not only have to tell you why, but it would have to provide a way for you to appeal that decision.

Let me be clear. Private entities are free to have their own opinions and viewpoints and should not be compelled by the government to publish alternative views, but that is not what we are talking about with these large social media platforms. Most strongly deny that they are publishers and instead hold themselves forth as neutral platforms for the free exchange of ideas from all corners. That is the promise they make to consumers.

The Wuhan reversal is more than a reminder that our social media experience is actually a heavily curated one. It also raises serious questions about censorship and the maintenance of the marketplace of ideas that is a hallmark of a free society. There is no free society without the free exchange of ideas. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom to speak in the public square—all of these are essential elements of a free society. The more a government or other entities crack down on freedom of speech and the free exchange of ideas, the more we move away from a free society and toward tyranny.

I say "or other entities" because the responsibility for protecting the free exchange of ideas extends beyond the government. Government, of course, has an absolute obligation to defend our fundamental freedoms, but other institutions in society also have a role. You can't have a free society without free institutions. I am thinking here particularly of the press, universities, and in this day and age, social media companies.

If the press or social media companies only sanction one narrative—the narrative preferred by the government or by social elites or by any other group—the marketplace of ideas shrinks substantially. If multiple groups that should be fostering the free exchange of ideas combine to limit or advance a particular narrative, they start to control public opinion instead of allowing individuals to form their own opinions based on a free flow of information.

Unfortunately, as the Wuhan story illustrates, today we are seeing a real movement to restrict the free flow of ideas. Whether we are talking about speech codes or social media censorship, more and more, we are seeing a preferred narrative being advanced and opinions outside of that preferred narrative being censored or marginalized.

We see it in government with bills like S. 1, which would, among other things, allow the IRS to consider an organization's views before deciding whether or not to grant it tax-exempt status, or the Equality Act, which would crack down on freedom of speech and freedom of religion in unprecedented ways. We see it outside government when media outlets engage in selective reporting to highlight an accepted narrative instead of reporting the news and the facts, whatever they are, or when social media censors legitimate theories or stories or when universities crack down on free speech.

In the wake of the Wuhan lab story, we saw widespread censorship across government, social media, and the press for political reasons. President Biden seemingly shut down the former President's investigation into the virus's origin because it was the former President's investigation. Democrats in Congress pressured social media companies to censor information that contradicted the narrative that they

were embracing. The mainstream media savaged the lab origin story. Social media sites censored it. And all of this happened because of the political affiliation of the people advancing this reasonable hypothesis.

You can only have a marketplace of ideas if ideas actually get out there, which is why censorship, as I have said, is antithetical to a free society. It is also important to note—and this is a critical, critical point—that having a free marketplace of ideas means allowing some ideas that might be wrong, that might seem offensive, that might seem silly. We are not talking about content that, for example, promotes violence but ideas that are provocative, debatable, or out of the mainstream. The alternative is allowing the government or some other entity to decide what information we see and what we believe.

It is important to remember that sometimes ideas that seem silly or wrong initially turn out to be right. More than one widely accepted scientific theory started out as a fringe position. A prevailing opinion may turn out to be wrong, and political or social power doesn't necessarily equal truth.

I hope that their abrupt reversal on COVID's possible origins makes media organizations and social media platforms think twice the next time they consider censoring a story. I hope it reminds them of the dangers of restricting the free flow of ideas and of their obligation to separate their politics from their jobs.

In a speech he delivered in 1967, Ronald Reagan, marveling at our government by the people, said this:

Perhaps you and I have lived too long with this miracle to properly be appreciative. Freedom is a fragile thing, and it's never more than one generation away from extinction. It is not ours by way of inheritance; it must be fought for and defended constantly by each generation, for it comes only once to a people.

I fear that long acquaintance with the blessings of liberty—with the blessings of a free press and freedom of speech and freedom of religion—has sometimes made us careless about the preservation of these freedoms. We are used to them, and we assume that they will always be with us. But, as Ronald Reagan pointed out, freedom has to be actively safeguarded, or it will be lost.

I have seen too many instances lately where our cherished First Amendment freedoms are subordinated to a political and social agenda, and I hope, I hope that the Wuhan story reminds us of the responsibility that each one of us has to safeguard these freedoms, lest they slip away from us.

BROADBAND

Mr. President, on Tuesday, the Commerce subcommittee of which I am the ranking member, the Subcommittee on Communications, Media, and Broadband, will hold a hearing on building resilient broadband networks. My hope is that this hearing will help

inform discussions of broadband funding in any infrastructure legislation.

I am particularly looking forward to hearing from Denny Law, the CEO of Golden West Telecommunications in South Dakota, who will speak on the challenges of deploying reliable and resilient broadband in rural areas.

The pandemic provided the most significant test to date of the resiliency of our broadband networks. Overnight, quite literally, our networks faced huge new demands. As the Nation locked down, demand for broadband shot up. Our phones and tablets and laptops became our main way of communicating with friends and family and, for many of us, our main way of doing our jobs. Video conferencing exploded—staff meetings, strategy meetings, virtual happy hours, telemedicine.

How did our networks stand up to the demand? Well, they exceeded expectations and vindicated the light-touch regulatory approach of the United States to broadband policy. While networks in Europe and elsewhere slowed streaming speeds in order to keep their networks up and running, U.S. networks maintained both their speed and quality. It was a real American success story.

The success of American networks during the pandemic was the result of sustained investment by U.S. telecommunications companies, which have made network reliability a priority. Congress should continue to encourage this kind of private investment and maintain a regulatory regime that allows companies to make the kinds of choices and investments that have resulted in strong and resilient U.S. networks.

Going forward, one of our priorities here in Congress has to be supporting the continued development of 5G. U.S. companies are already building out 5G networks, but there is more work to be done. We need to remove regulatory and permitting hurdles to deployment and ensure that companies have access to the spectrum they need to build strong networks.

Increasing spectrum availability will spur 5G deployments, and we need to build on previous efforts to make spectrum available, like my MOBILE NOW Act, legislation that we passed a few years ago. I have also repeatedly introduced legislation called the STREAMLINE Small Cell Deployment Act to address another key part of the 5G equation, and that is infrastructure.

Mr. President, 5G technology requires not just traditional cell phone towers but small antennas called "small cells" that can often be attached to existing infrastructure, like utility poles or buildings. The Federal Communications Commission, under Chairman Pai, modernized its regulations for the approval of small cells, but more work can be done to expedite small cell deployment.

The STREAMLINE Act focuses on updating current law to better reflect

emerging technology and to speed up permitting while respecting the role of State and local governments in making deployment decisions.

Adequate spectrum and the ability to efficiently deploy infrastructure are essential for building out strong U.S. 5G networks. But there is another key part of the equation, and that is having a sufficient workforce to meet the demands of 5G deployment and, later, 5G maintenance. That is why I have introduced the Telecommunications Skilled Workforce Act. My bill would help increase the number of workers enrolled in 5G training programs and identify ways to grow the telecommunications workforce to meet the demands of 5G.

As the resident of a rural State, expanding broadband access in rural areas has long been a priority of mine here in the U.S. Senate. We have made a lot of progress in recent years, but there is more work to be done.

I recently introduced the Rural Connectivity Advancement Program Act, along with Senators HASSAN, MORAN, and CORTEZ MASTO. Our legislation would set aside proceeds from spectrum auctions conducted by the FCC to build out broadband in unserved areas. It is essential that we expedite the deployment of fixed broadband in rural areas because this technology is necessary groundwork for 5G deployment. Without reliable broadband, rural areas will be excluded from access to 5G.

Reliable, fast internet is an essential element of our Nation's infrastructure. Like roads and bridges and railways and airports, strong internet networks keep our economy strong, and any infrastructure package should make an investment in broadband and 5G, as well as including regulatory relief, like that in my STREAMLINE Act, to expedite 5G deployment. However, we need to make sure that any Federal money is allocated in the most efficient manner possible and distributed responsibly, with coordination by expert Agencies like the Federal Communications Commission, to prevent waste.

We don't want another situation like what happened in the wake of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which provided more than \$7 billion to multiple Agencies for rural broadband deployment, a majority of which was wasted, resulting in just a fraction of the access that was promised.

I am looking forward to Tuesday's hearing, and I will continue to work to advance nationwide 5G deployment and ensure that our rural communities receive the full benefits of the 5G revolution.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority whip.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—H.R. 1652

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, in the city of Chicago, which I am proud to represent, there is an organization called Life Span. This is an incredible group of people who dedicate their